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Gates Issues a Defense Of Record With C.I.A.

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WASHINGTON, March 3 — Robert M. Gates, the Acting Director of Central Intelligence, has issued a wide-ranging defense of his record in the Iran-contra affair, denying suggestions that he ignored or covered up evidence of improprieties.

President Reagan withdrew Mr. Gates's nomination to be Director of Central Intelligence on Monday. Members of Congress had warned the White House that there might be a long, bitter struggle over the nomination in the Senate.

Many lawmakers had said that Mr. Gates should not be confirmed until Congress completed its investigations of the Iran-contra affair. The inquiries may continue until the autumn.

In a letter to Senator David L. Boren, chairman of the Select Committee on Intelligence, Mr. Gates listed seven specific allegations against him and tried to answer them.

'Did Not Turn a Blind Eye'

"I did not turn a blind eye to the speculation about possible diversion of funds from the Iran arms sales to the Nicaraguan rebels, said Mr. Gates, a career intelligence officer who will remain Deputy Director of Central Intelligence.

Mr. Gates acknowledged that he had received such "speculation" last October from Charles Allen, the agency's national intelligence officer for counterterrorism.

The Central Intelligence Agency helped ship arms to Iran through various channels from November 1985 to late October 1986, according to the Tower Commission. The commission said that William J. Casey, the Director of Central Intelligence, "appears to have been informed in considerable detail about the specifics" of the operation.

However, Mr. Gates said, in October and November of last year, "I was not given pertinent information by our own people and was misled by the National Security Council."

Mr. Gates said he had "pressed" Lieut. Col. Oliver L. North for information about the C.I.A.'s role in a private network supplying aid to the Nicaraguan rebels, known as contras. Mr. Gates said he had been "assured" by Colonel North that the agency was "clean." Colonel North, a member of the staff of the National Security Council, supervised the arms shipments to Iran and helped coordinate assistance

to the contras.

Mr. Gates said he had expressed "concern" about the agency's failure to notify Congress of the arms shipments to Iran in 1986. But, he said, his objections to the underlying policy were not strong enough to justify resigning.

"I should have argued harder for notification, and I should have been more aggressive in October," Mr. Gates said. "But I advised my boss of my concerns and took action" to inform Vice Adm. John M. Poindexter, who was then President Reagan's national security adviser.

Members of Congress did not immediately challenge the assertions that Mr. Gates listed as "facts" in his letter to Mr. Boren, an Oklahoma Democrat.

"I don't know that anybody has tried to pass judgment on the letter," David E. Holliday, a spokesman for the Senate Intelligence Committee, said. "We have no reason to disbelieve what he said. But is that the whole story? We don't know."

Some members of Congress have criticized Mr. Gates on the ground that he lacked independence. He denied that he had "slanted or politicized" intelligence reports to please policy makers.

"We are sometimes wrong, but we are proud of our independence," he said.

Mr. Gates also defended his handling of a memorandum that recommended arms dealings with Iran as one way to enhance Western influence in Teheran. The memorandum was prepared by Graham Fuller, the national intelligence officer for the Middle East, in May 1985, three months before Israel began shipping American weapons to Iran.

On Provoking Debate

Mr. Gates said he "neither saw nor approved" the memorandum before it was sent to the White House and the State Department. But, he said, Mr. Fuller's work on the proposal was "consistent with my policy that intelligence analysts feel free to challenge conventional wisdom and provoke debate."

In his four-page letter, Mr. Gates said it was "particularly outrageous" for people to suggest that the "C.I.A. participated in a cover-up" of the Iran-contra affair. Mr. Casey testified before the Senate Intelligence Committee on Nov. 21, but did not mention the diversion of money to the contras.